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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 MINSK 000619

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SUBJECT: POST-ELECTION PROFILE OF BELARUSIAN YOUTH GROUPS

Classified By: Ambassador George Krol for reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: On April 25-27 and May 3-4, Poloffs met with representatives of five Belarusian youth organizations: Zubr, which announced its formal dissolution in May 2006; Third Way; Association of Belarusian Students; Volnaya Moladz; and New Life Church. All of these groups have been directly or indirectly involved in opposition activities since the presidential elections in March. Belarusian authorities have retaliated against several members of these groups through university expulsions and imprisonment. Nevertheless, every organization plans to continue its activism including flashmobs, debates, and other forms of demonstrating against the Lukashenko regime. END SUMMARY.

Zubr

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¶2. (C) On April 25, Poloff met with Irina Tolstik, a representative from Zubr. Tolstik estimated that approximately 500 Zubr members participated in the March 19 demonstrations, 100 in the tent city and 500 in the March 25 demonstration. Tolstik claimed that Zubr's numbers have increased following the demonstrations since so many of the youth in the tent city were interested in becoming members after the demonstrations.

¶4. (C) The parents of arrested demonstrators have formed their own loose network, a Committee for the Parents of Arrested Demonstrators. Tolstik said that there were about 400 parents involved. They first met when they were outside the prisons looking for their children. They became enraged when state television accused their children of being drunks and drug addicts and have written letters to state television, Putin, and the Belarusian Ministry of Information. Tolstik claimed that several of them told her that next time they will demonstrate alongside their children.

¶5. (C) Although Tolstik emphasized that Zubr is non-political, she told Poloff that Zubr supports Milinkevich because they share the same goal: change. However, she claimed that Zubr members would not seek spoils if the candidate whom they supported comes to power. Although Tolstik said that Zubr would disband and its members would go back to their normal lives when the organization achieves its goal, in May 2006, Zubr issued a statement on its website, <http://zubr-belarus.com>, announcing the organization's dissolution so that its membership and resources could be subsumed by a united Belarusian opposition movement. Post has not been able to contact Zubr leadership since and has heard

that these people have left Belarus. However, on June 6 the Ambassador recently encountered Zubr leader Vladimir Kobets in Kiev. Kobets said Zubr had not stopped its activities underground and explained that the announcement of its disbanding was aimed at convincing the BKGB that the organization did not exist.

### Third Way

16. (C) On April 26, Pavel Morosev from Third Way assessed post-election demonstrations as a success because of high participation levels but poorly planned. He commented that the political parties in Belarus are not professional and that NGOs and civil society activists are more capable than the politicians. Morosev added that the parties supporting Milinkevich were revealing their incompetence through their lack of preparation for the twentieth anniversary of the Chernobyl accident, which he considered a great opportunity to get people out to the streets. However, he said that the opposition parties were neither mobilizing people nor providing clear instructions or information. Consequently, there was confusion even over where the march should start.

17. (C) With respect to future events, Third Way planned at the end of May to invite civil society leaders and youth groups to participate in a debate on possible courses of action for the future. Morosev plans to hold this round table outside of Belarus, possibly in Kiev, for the safety of the participants but also because it is inexpensive to travel there, visas are not necessary, and it is a democratically inclined country. Moreover, Third Way plans to hold two seven-day seminars this summer (in Kiev or Crimea) for 30 up-and-coming youth activists. Experts would lecture on

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leadership, journalism, computer skills, strategic planning, security preparedness, etc.

18. (C) Third Way plans to create parallel versions of its website, [www.3rdway.org](http://www.3rdway.org), aimed at targeting different audiences (Belarusian, German, French, and American). Many of the articles/information would be the same, but each site would be tailored to meet the specific needs/interests of the audience. In addition, Morosev also mentioned creating a short documentary about the post-election demonstrations.

### Association of Belarusian Students

19. (C) On April 27, Poloff met with representatives from the Association of Belarusian Students, including the head, Alyona Talapila from Minsk State Linguistics University, and two others, who did not want to give their last names, Nastya from the Pedagogical University and Yevgeny from the Belarusian National Technical University. During the meeting, the students told Poloff that many who became active in the opposition learned of the demonstrations and the tent city through state television's coverage and wanted to see for themselves what was really happening; others saw printed or internet advertisements about the demonstration; still others heard about it from Milinkevich's televised speech, which the students claimed was widely watched; and finally, other people came (especially students) because they had been specifically told not to go or that it would be dangerous.

110. (C) The three students told Poloff that during the tent city and the following imprisonment, the activists exchanged contact information and kept in touch via phone and email. To find out about upcoming events, such as flash mobs, the three students said that they refer to the "hot news" section of the live journal website ([www.livejournal.com](http://www.livejournal.com)). Universities block access to this site and to Milinkevich's "Za Svobodu" site on campus computers. Students can access the sites at internet cafes and even in the dormitories, although it is against university rules to do so. Yevgeny

told Poloff that the university confiscated the server for his dormitory before the elections, leaving the students without internet access for two weeks.

¶11. (C) All three said that the best way for the opposition to maintain high levels of interest and participation is to continue holding events. These events should be well advertised and people will show up. Talapila commented that unlike after the presidential elections in 2001, there are no feelings of apathy or depression among the population. She cited the flashmobs that are occurring almost daily.

¶12. (C) According to the representatives, students face serious consequences for their activism. Talapila indicated that from December to April, 26 students had been expelled from universities for political activities. However, all three expected more expulsions during the summer term. They insisted that the GOB has created a "black list" of students who participated in the post election demonstrations and will use this list to expel more students. Yevgeny had trouble with university officials even before the demonstrations because he collected signatures for Milinkevich; he was called into the rector's office for a reprimand and forced to sign papers saying that he would obey university rules. After he was released from jail (administrative charges) for participating in the demonstration, the KGB searched his dorm room, confiscated some computer discs, and pressured him to work as an informant.

Volnaya Moladz

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¶13. (C) On May 3, Poloffs met with two coordinators, Matvey Chistik and Mikhail Sheremet, from Volnaya Moladz (VM). The organization was founded at the end of 2004 by young activists that had been abroad or who had friends who had been abroad and wanted to see Belarus change to become more like its European and Western neighbors. VM is comprised of young activists (under 30 years old) and students and has approximately 200 active members. Although the majority of VM members are located in Minsk, the organization has branches and members throughout the country.

¶14. (C) According to the VM representatives, VM cooperated in the past with Zubr and Malady Front, but prefers now to

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work with youth organizations, such as Razom, that emerged following the elections. (Note: Poloff asked for Razom's contact info, but the representatives would not give it to her, claiming that the group is always changing their contact info to avoid harassment and persecution.)

¶15. (C) VM refuses to take part in negative PR campaigns or violent actions. The representatives said that they would not even write graffiti on public buildings since they believe that the majority of Belarusians disapprove of such actions. (Note: This meeting occurred one day before the trial of Malady Front activist Artur Finkevich who was sentenced to two years of restricted freedom for anti-Lukashenko graffiti.) VM focuses on distributing information; holding flash-mobs (they have done 7-8 since the elections -- they advertise these flash mobs on their website, [www.volniya.org](http://www.volniya.org), and via cell phone); and conduct educational seminars every two or three weeks with the purpose of persuading people that they are not alone and need not be afraid.

¶16. (C) Like Zubr, VM supported Milinkevich. They collected signatures, held signs/pickets, etc., and participated in the post-election demonstrations and the tent city. Approximately 20 of their members were arrested during the tent city raid and received prison sentences ranging from 3-15 days. Several VM members have been expelled from universities, including one coordinator who was expelled the week after the elections and now studies in Vilnius.

New Life Church  
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¶17. (C) On May 4, Pol/Econ Chief and Poloff met with New Life Church (NLC) youth group leader Ivan Mulyan. The Protestant NLC youth group consists of approximately 100 members ages 16-25 years old. Mulyan said that the group has approximately 50 active members. The group mainly meets to pray and worship, but also tries to introduce non-Christians to their Church.

¶18. (C) Mulyan said that when NLC members learned of the tent city on October Square, they immediately joined the demonstrators because "they felt that they belonged there." They were joined by other religious groups on the Square, including the Church of Jesus Christ, the Church of John the Baptist and the Living Word Church (Grodno). Mulyan said that the group numbered between 20 and 25 persons.

¶19. (C) When P/E Chief asked whether youth group or church leadership encouraged the members of the congregation to participate in the post-election demonstrations, Mulyan answered that the pastor mentioned the demonstrations one time, but never ordered or encouraged the congregation to participate in them. The leadership understood the risks involved in participating in these demonstrations and would not order anyone to attend. They instead simply spoke/preached the truth about the regime and let the people come to their own conclusions because it would be irresponsible to tell people what to do. Mulyan insisted that everyone made their own choice about whether or not to attend the demonstrations. He said that the people did not need any encouragement; they are tired of the lies that the regime constantly tells.

COMMENT  
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¶20. (C) COMMENT: The political opposition youth movement in Belarus, like the Belarusian opposition movement in general, appears to be in a period of chastened circumspection following the post-election demonstrations and the GOB's crackdown. However, the groups still appear to be maintaining regular contacts among their members. This in itself is a positive sign. Even when the leaders of youth organizations eschew overt political activism, e.g., NLC leader Ivan Mulyan, these organizations act as word-of-mouth conduits for disseminating opposition information and networks for recruiting new anti-Lukashenko activists. These functions are particularly important since internet and telephone communications are closely monitored by the universities and other organs of state power.

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